



Going FOR 90% Plus:

**How to Stay in the
Target Language**

BY DOUGLASS CROUSE



Cynthia Hitz launched her language teaching career largely by the book. “I came in and did it the way I was taught in college: I’d say ‘Here’s the grammar’ and put it on the board; I’d say ‘Here’s the worksheet,’ and hand it out,” says Hitz, a Spanish teacher at Palmyra Area High School in Pennsylvania. “On good days the students would do some reading or speaking. But a lot of it was textbook-driven.”

Something else about those early days still bothers her: When it came to communication with and among students, English often ruled.

A few years ago, dissatisfied with the results she was seeing in her upper-level courses, Hitz set out on a new path. Verb charts and worksheets were out, replaced by more partner oral tasks and group discussions. Hitz ramped up her use of Spanish and, seeking the same commitment in her students, circled their seats and chose topics in tune with what high school kids care about. Soon, the language of the classroom matched the course title.



Nick Staffa, a Chinese teacher at Oak Forest Elementary School in Memphis, TN, says he and his colleagues have found using technology and visuals helps keep the class from speaking English.

Today’s language classrooms increasingly reflect ACTFL’s recommendation that communication in the target language comprises at least 90% of instructional time.

“I found the students’ desire to communicate their thoughts and opinions in Spanish opened the door for learning more vocabulary and grammar,” says Hitz, now in her 13th year as a teacher.

There is no doubt that we as a profession have come a long way from the old drill-and-kill days. Today’s language classrooms increasingly reflect ACTFL’s recommendation that communication in the target language comprises at least 90% of instructional time, in line with an emphasis on Standards-based learning that places proficiency above grammatical precision. But the leap into 90%+ territory can be a daunting one, particularly in light of the strong pull past experience can exert on current practice.

“We’re headed in the right direction, but we aren’t beyond grammar being the backbone of language teaching,” says Greg Duncan, a language learning consultant and founder of InterPrep, Inc. in Atlanta. “There are a lot of teachers trying to move away from it but it’s tough. For a lot of us that’s how we learned and how we had it modeled for us.”

At the heart of the 90% goal lie two questions that keep teachers up late, pop up routinely on online forums, draw crowds at conferences, and spark animated debate in department meetings:

How do we make the target language comprehensible to our students?

How do we persuade students to resist the easy path of English when speaking with one another?

Meeting the Challenge

Answers vary from instructor to instructor and from one group of learners to another. A class of college language majors might well crave an immersive environment, while students in a middle school classroom—with its mixed levels of motivation and readiness—might require a daily dose of coaxing.

In that context, the 90%+ recommendation serves a dual purpose: as a lens through which teachers get a better sense of what the profession as a whole feels is good practice, and as a yardstick to measure the relative amounts of target and native language they themselves are using and promoting, says Robert Ponterio, a French professor at the State University of New York-Cortland.

For new teachers and English-leaning veteran teachers looking to change, teaching in the target language requires a degree of planning that can at first appear overwhelming. Reasons for reluctance range from concerns about student comprehension, to beliefs that some languages are too difficult, to not having enough time for planning or covering curriculum. Jean LeLoup finds irony in that last objection—considering that many teachers have classes that meet every other day or even once a week. She often tells other teachers, “Listen, you don’t have time *not* to teach in the target language.”

Reaching and exceeding the 90% mark is a goal any language teacher can meet, she says, and a vital part of bringing students to ever-higher levels of proficiency. LeLoup has taught Spanish for

Know the ACTFL Position Statement

Use of the Target Language in the Classroom (May 2010)

Research indicates that effective language instruction must provide significant levels of meaningful communication* and interactive feedback in the target language in order for students to develop language and cultural proficiency. The pivotal role of target-language interaction in language learning is emphasized in the *K–16 Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom. In classrooms that feature maximum target-language use, instructors use a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and support meaning making. For example, they:

- provide comprehensible input that is directed toward communicative goals;
- make meaning clear through body language, gestures, and visual support;
- conduct comprehension checks to ensure understanding;
- negotiate meaning with students and encourage negotiation among students;
- elicit talk that increases in fluency, accuracy, and complexity over time;
- encourage self-expression and spontaneous use of language;
- teach students strategies for requesting clarification and assistance when faced with comprehension difficulties; and
- offer feedback to assist and improve students' ability to interact orally in the target language.

*Communication for a classical language refers to an emphasis on reading ability and for American Sign Language (ASL) to signed communicative ability.

more than 35 years, at both secondary and college levels, but that career path once seemed unlikely. She describes the start of a trip to Central America in 1971, and the realization that something had gone wrong in her own language study.

"I'd had four years of Spanish in high school and four years of Spanish in college. But when I got off a plane in Nicaragua after all that time, I couldn't speak or understand anything," she recalls. When she landed her first Spanish teaching job in Missouri in 1974, she resolved that students passing through her classroom would leave better prepared for the outside world.

The Teacher as Input

LeLoup, who has taught since 2007 at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado, saw that a key ingredient missing from her own student experience was the sort of comprehensible input advocated by Stephen Krashen.

"My own kids were going to hear Spanish from me," she says. "In a suburb of St. Louis, there was nowhere else they'd get it. I was their input."

Like other teachers who stress communicative learning, LeLoup has stayed in tune with the latest research while never straying from the basics: pairing the target language with visual support and gestures; slowing down, simplifying, and repeating key terms; using cognates when possible; checking often for understanding; and engaging students with real world-like situations that allow them to function at their particular proficiency level.

Even long-time masters of the craft concede that target language instruction demands careful planning of lessons and materials, along with high-energy execution. Those considering a foray into 90%+ often question their creativity or dramatic chops, or doubt their ability to maintain the target language during long blocks of time.

Veteran practitioners say it can be helpful to observe other teachers in action—either in person or on video—then plan and rehearse lessons with a colleague. Some groups offer training in specific methods of maintaining the target language, such as TPR Storytelling.

Classroom design can go far in setting the stage for second language communication. Desks can be arranged to allow students to quickly partner up or converse within small groups. Posted password phrases and language ladders can serve not only as a crutch for students, but as a guide to which expressions teachers should repeat most. Some instructors suggest sticking questions on the walls as a reminder to scaffold.

Making It Comprehensible

Input in the target language is one thing, but making sure that students "get it" is another. Frequent, reliable comprehension checks do just that, allowing teachers to "keep our finger on the pulse of student understanding," says Ponterio.

Many teachers turn to technology to aid comprehension and give students exposure to authentic cultural products and practices. Ellen Shrager uses it in every class from start to finish.

The 25-year teaching veteran began supporting her Spanish with sequenced digital slides last year after coming to a realization: She routinely scripted presentations for language conferences; why not do the same thing for her students?

Her PowerPoint slides, projected on an interactive whiteboard, give step-by-step visual support to her Level 1 students at Abington Junior High School in Pennsylvania, as Shrager moves through each day's lesson. A handheld remote allows her to walk among the desks while keeping an eye on students. The slides, imported into ActivInspire software with embedded im-



Nicci Miller, a Russian teacher at Peabody Elementary School in Memphis, TN, embraces the use of the target language in the classroom.

ages, videos, and pronunciation tips, took about an hour per day to create for each of Shrager's courses.

"I find that if students don't know what's going on they will keep asking questions in English until they understand," she says. "If students see words and supporting images then I can maintain a high level of Spanish and they're able to stay in the flow of the class without feeling frustrated."

The Students as Output

Creating a classroom environment that reinforces expectations of target language use and maintaining a good relationship with students are also vital ingredients, says Mark Warford, a professor at SUNY's Buffalo State College. It was as a student in LeLoup's class at Webster Groves High School in Missouri in the 1980s that Warford first caught the language bug.

"Jean—and the comfortable environment she created in class—is the reason I do this," he says. "You have to be a good architect—arranging the room and organizing communication as open and flowing—and also a good counselor. That means encouraging participation, not coercing it. Kids need to feel competent and feel relatedness."

Some teachers use reward systems to recognize students who maintain the target language, with points that can be redeemed for prizes or privileges. Others stress intrinsic

rewards: the pride that comes with improvement in each communication mode.

Experts agree that, in either case, it's important to educate students on proficiency targets and have them set reasonable, measurable goals. Group discussions in the target language and individual feedback sessions—in English at lower levels—can then offer an opportunity for personal connections with students.

"The relationship with kids is critical," says Alyssa Villarreal, world language coordinator for Memphis City Schools. "If you're focusing on proficiency, you're focusing on what kids can do with the language. You want to create an environment where they find small successes every day. When kids leave a classroom feeling successful, they want to do it again and they want to do more."

When Do I Use English?

Inherent in the 90%+ recommendation is some first language wiggle room. Some teachers use English, for example, for brief metalinguistic discussions or when clarifying the meaning of a key word when all other methods have been exhausted. Even 100-percenters will employ English strategically during the early days of a course, particularly in explaining learning goals, assessment standards, and expectations for student behavior.

RESOURCES

Learn More and Connect with Colleagues

ACTFL Community

community.actfl.org

A place where ACTFL members and non-members take part in a variety of language teaching-related discussions

ACTFL Webinars for Professionals

www.actfl.org/webinars

ACTFL webinar series are led by educational experts and each series delivers new insights and proven techniques educators can use right away

FLTEACH

web.cortland.edu/flteach/

A listserv that allows members to pose and respond to questions related to methods and resources. Members can also search archives by topic

Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition

www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html

A widely known theory of second language acquisition

Teaching Foreign Languages K-12: A Library of Classroom Practices

www.learner.org/resources/series185.html

A video library for K–12 language teachers; 28 half-hour and 2 one-hour video programs, library guide, and website (now on DVD)

Some teachers lay a target language line at the threshold of their classroom, or hang a sign with "English" on one side and the target language on the other. That sets expectations for language use at any given moment in a lesson.

HOW TO STAY IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

Whatever the method, using English needs to be a conscious decision considered during the planning of the lesson, says Donna Clementi, a professor of foreign language methods at Lawrence University in Wisconsin and former high school French teacher. “Once you start using English, it’s all too easy to use more,” she says.

Memphis City Schools district has codified the 90% recommendation. No problem, says elementary school Chinese teacher Nick Staffa: He and his colleagues often cruise along at 99%.

“We’ve all found that there is very little that needs to be provided in English if you’re using visuals and technology,” he says. Even so, there are times when a quick detour into English makes sense. “You might be using a lot of time going around and around in the target language when you could just quickly use English. You have to make the most of the instructional time.”

Nicci Miller, a Russian teacher in the district, uses one of her three class-time minutes in English to explain lesson objectives at the start of class. She saves the remaining two for the end, checking to make sure each was met.

Many teachers find exploration of cultural perspectives a tightrope walk, particularly at beginning levels. Part of Clementi’s approach was to occasionally send home readings on cultural concepts that students could fill out in English. That would prepare them to take part in next-day discussions in the target language at a level that, while basic linguistically, reflected a deeper understanding.

Teachers often say they reserve English for “important” discussion topics such as behavioral expectations and assignment deadlines. But Ponterio warns that this could be misinterpreted.

“We are sending a message suggesting that the student can just wait and listen for the ‘important’ things in English and ignore the foreign ‘noise,’” he notes. “It isn’t that using English is good or bad, right or wrong. It simply has advantages and disadvantages that the teacher needs to be aware of and weigh carefully.”

Duncan suggests teachers pose this question when planning: *Why would students choose to speak in English?*

“As you think of possible reasons, then you can think of what sort of interventions should be put in place,” he says. “Why would a student choose to use English if he knows the words to use in the target language? The answer is, he wouldn’t. Can I construct my activities so a student is not having to use vocabulary and grammar structures he doesn’t know?”

Then again, some English use by students may ultimately serve the learning goals of the class. Metalinguistic talk about elements of grammar, or one student walking another through instructions for a target language task—such interaction generally is a positive, Duncan says.

“What those kids may be speaking about in English may not be too bad,” he says. “They may be explaining to each other details of the activity, and that is helpful English.”

Change comes at its own pace, and as it happens, more and more teachers are taking courageous stances in support of using more of the second language in the classroom.



Cynthia Hitz, a Spanish teacher at Palmyra Area High School in Palmyra, PA, uses various methods, including arranging their chairs in a circle, to keep her students speaking in the target language.

I NEED TO USE ENGLISH ... OR DO I?

Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg, in their influential text, *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, propose that language teachers ask themselves these questions when considering the use of English in class:

- Can I find a way to communicate the idea in the target language?
- Can I simplify the concept or the information?
- Can I add concrete materials, visuals, or experiences to enrich the context and to make the concept or the information comprehensible in the new language?

If in each case the answer is “no,” the authors suggest teachers consider choosing a different concept, delaying the subject until students reach a higher proficiency level, asking the classroom or content teacher to follow up in English, or creating a substitute teacher lesson or homework assignment that explores the topic in English.

Some Strategies to Get Students Speaking the Language

- Start the year with an explanation of why staying in the target language is so important and follow up with motivational chats throughout the year. Praise students—individually and collectively—when they make the effort.
- Plan lessons so as to eliminate idle time, which can lead students to chat in English.
- Change seating often so students have a chance to pair up with different classmates.
- Design info gap activities in a way that students must use the language to obtain the information they’re missing. Let students know they could be asked at any moment to report their information to the class.
- Post high-frequency phrases around the classroom so students can refer to them if they get stuck.
- When your students speak to you or ask you something in English, give a quizzical look and say you don’t understand.
- Use activities such as inside–outside circles that allow students to practice common expressions and structures in rapid sequence. This also gives the teacher a chance to listen for places where communication is breaking down.
- Try a reward system in which students can earn points for maintaining the target language (for an example, see “Simulated Immersion Environment Engages Students in Language Use” in the February 2011 issue of *The Language Educator*).
- Encourage students to come up with silly stories as part of a survey or TPRS activities.

Note: These ideas were culled from blogs, online discussion lists, and previous issues of The Language Educator.

Factors Encouraging and Discouraging 90% Language Use

Sometimes teachers arrive in a district with a proficiency mindset—or veteran teachers seek to adopt one—only to encounter opposition.

“I’ve had alumni of our program say their principals will cave in an instant when a parent calls and says, ‘Why are you teaching my son in Spanish?’” Warford says of his Buffalo State graduates. “Thanks to the ACTFL-NCATE Standards, more teacher candidates are coming into the field with a solid proficiency-oriented background, but at times they are running into grammar-driven settings in which the first language predominates.

“You have to be savvy in the world of teaching,” he adds. “Be vital. Keep your saws sharp. But realize that you may have to acknowledge and empathize with lines of thinking and practices that are in direct conflict with your own. Change comes at its own pace, and as it happens, more and more teachers are taking courageous stances in support of using more of the second language in the classroom.”

Experts believe the tide favors such educators. For example, recent changes in Advanced Placement exams for world languages—which aim at valuing proficiency over fill-in-the-blanks—will have a “great washback effect on instruction,” Duncan says.

“The new versions of the exams are clearly designed to have students use language to make meaning, and that will have a

huge positive impact toward a more meaningful use of language in classrooms,” he says. “So many people put stock in AP so it is regarded as a standard for programs to work towards.”

Perhaps more importantly, hearing and using the language is what students say they want, Duncan notes. “In most schools, there’s generally a drop of 75% after the perceived language requirement ends,” he says. “I think students leave because they’re not satisfied with what they are getting. What the customer wants is what our standards say we should be giving them.”

Welcome Changes

Cynthia Hitz’s experience bears that out. More of her students are choosing to chat in Spanish, and more report they are continuing their studies in college at higher levels. On the other end of the curve, Hitz and her colleagues are redoubling their target language approach with beginner classes. Perhaps the brightest indicator Hitz has witnessed is enrollment in Spanish 5: About 90% of former Spanish 4 students signed up for the class this year, she says.

“I could kick myself when I think of the years I went by the book,” she says. “But that’s the past. This year [far more] students in Spanish 4 said it was worth their time to go back to Spanish. They’re excited about it and they’re more relaxed. The fact that they want to talk in the target language just says it all.”

Douglass Crouse is a contributing writer to The Language Educator. He also teaches French at Sparta Middle School in New Jersey.